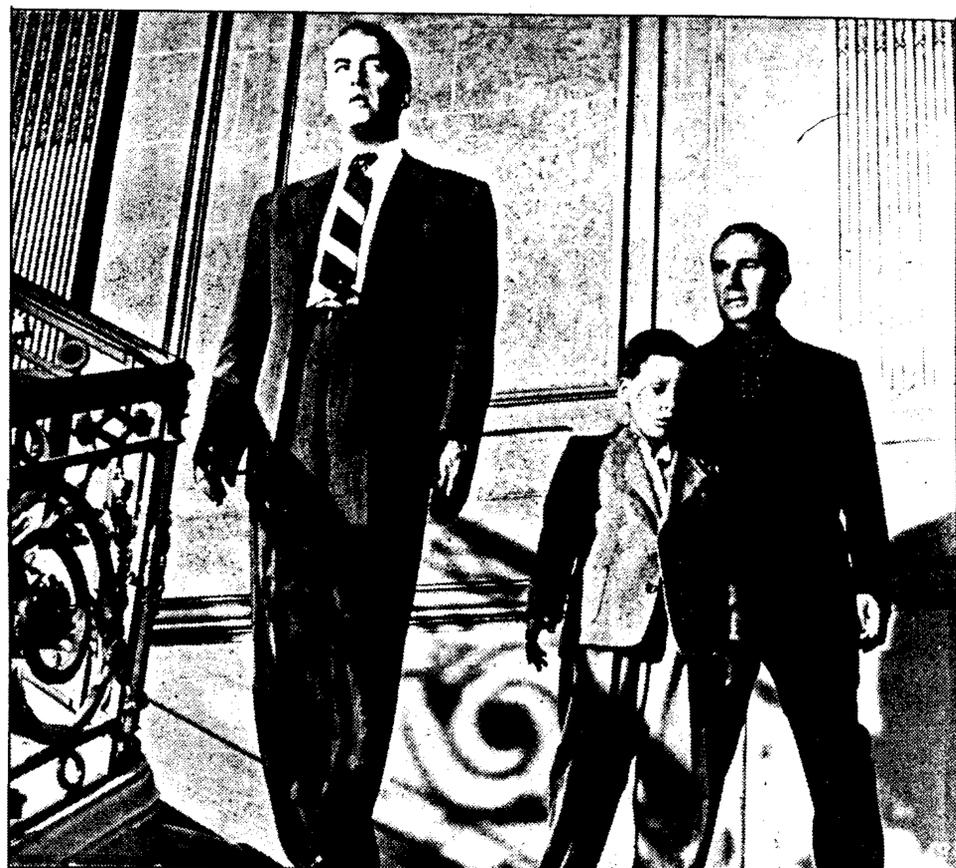


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The 1956 remake (right) is a much more high-powered and elaborately orchestrated exercise in suspense.

'Hitchcock's Les Parents Terribles'

By Andrew Sarris

THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1934). Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Screenplay by A. R. Rawlinson, Charles Bennett, D. B. Wyndham Lewis, and Edwin Greenwood, from a theme by Lewis and Bennett. Additional dialogue: Evelyn Williams. Produced by Michael Balcon and Ivor Montagu.

THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1956). Directed and produced by Alfred Hitchcock. Screenplay by John Michael Hayes and Angus McPhail, from a story of Charles Bennett and D. B. Wyndham Lewis. Originally a Paramount film, now released by Universal.

Stewart Klein, the movie maven for Metromedia here in Gotham, recently remarked that though the late Alfred Hitchcock professed a preference for his 1956 *The Man Who Knew Too Much* over the 1934 original, he (Klein) much preferred the earlier British version to its later American remake. Klein seemed particularly underwhelmed by Doris Day's desperately loud rendition of "Que sera, sera" at an embassy function in order to alert her imprisoned son to her presence. I am aware that Doris Day is almost as much of a lost cause in America as Jerry Lewis, and I see nothing to be gained by a frontal assault on such strongly entrenched disdain. Yet I still think that the 1956 *The Man Who Knew Too Much* has been underrated largely because it has been misunderstood.

This is not to say that the 1934 original is at all unworthy of our affection and admiration. Actually, the Hitchcock legend for legerdemain actually began in 1934 with *The Man Who Knew Too Much* as the first of his fully realized shaggy-McGuffin thrillers. The cast alone suggests an ascension to the major leagues of moviemaking. Leslie Banks, Peter Lorre, Edna Best, Pierre Fresnay, and the child actress Nova Pilbeam introduce a more continental and less insular tone to Hitchcock's world. The sharp-eyed Londoner now seems to have an insight into world affairs. He is not to deal explicitly with the rise of fascism until well after the outbreak of World War II, but there is already an intimation in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* of a frightening new world of political fanaticism. Lorre, in transit from Fritz Lang's Franz Becker (*M*) to Josef von Sternberg's Raskolnikov, embodies much of

the charming irony of a European sensibility in conflict with the stolid British passion for decorum. Hitchcock was inspired by Lorre's playful temperament to give him additional dabs of color both in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and in *The Secret Agent* (1936).

The bare bones of the plot do not begin to convey the psychological complexities of the characters. A British couple (Banks and Best) traveling in Switzerland have their daughter (Pilbeam) kidnapped after the husband acquires some cryptic information about an assassination plot from a dying secret agent (Fresnay). After many adventures, the plot is thwarted and the daughter rescued, but not before a big shoot-out between the police and a band of terrorists led by Lorre ends in the death of most of the terrorists and a few policemen.

The action is deliberately disjointed as it hops from a Swiss chalet to a London tabernacle to Albert Hall with just the slightest rhyme or reason. Especially rhyme. Hitchcock sets up emotional echoes with a frivolous skeet-shooting contest at the beginning of the movie and a life-and-death rematch of sorts at the end. Also, Fresnay is introduced to the audience with a fear-stricken expression on his face as he skis downhill, but the upshot of this expression is a minor collision on the course. Later he is dancing, a blissful smile on his face. A crack in the glass of the windowpane, a muffled bang on the soundtrack barely above the music, and Fresnay slowly slumps to the floor, his smile glazed into a death mask. His earlier fear on the ski trail had been premature but prophetic. Death generally finds Hitchcock's characters in the wrong mood and the wrong costume.

The pièce de résistance of the film is the now famous Albert Hall scene in which Best sits enigmatically in the middle of a visualized moral dilemma, the life of her daughter weighing in the balance against the life of a foreign statesman, and the music playing on relentlessly to its preordained climax. As the camera closes in on the wife's inscrutable features, moral responsibility is transferred to the audience. But not entirely. The wife's own feelings are complicated by

regret and remorse. Her daughter has always been much closer to daddy than to her. At the chalet the daughter dances with the husband while the wife is dancing coquettishly with one of her admirers. (It is significant that in the 1956 remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, the daughter has been switched to a son, who is much closer to his mother than to his father.) Indeed, in charting the transition of Hitchcock from Britain to America, one may note the pattern of fathers and daughters in Britain as opposed to mothers and sons in America. Thus, amid the genre conventions of guns and chases there lurks a very lucidly realized world of family feelings.

The 1956 remake is a much more high-powered and elaborately orchestrated exercise in suspense. The amiable set pieces of the 1934 thriller took place in locations—St. Moritz, London—that the director knew firsthand, and could therefore sketch in with knowingly realistic touches. The atmosphere is cozily low-key, and it is possible to discern a behavioral identification between the director and his players. By contrast, Hitchcock's relationship with the more garish backgrounds of Morocco and London for the remake is far more exotic. Also, Hitch's connection with the overbearing American tourists played by James Stewart and Doris Day is less intimate and more ironic. John Michael Hayes has contributed some unusually bitchy repartee for these two icons of All-American wholesomeness, but American audiences hardly seem to notice, so complacent are they about the stability of this faintly comic couple. Actually, both Stewart and Day had become typecast in the '50s for what amounted to sitcom bickerings and misunderstandings.

Gradually, as the noose of the child-kidnap plot begins tightening around their necks and they begin gasping for breath, a wild violence begins erupting within their psyches. Stewart, particularly, becomes guilty time and again of overkill in the pursuit of his objective. It is not that Bernard Miles and Brenda de Banzie are more sympathetic villains than Lorre was in the 1934 opus, but rather that Stewart and Day are infinitely less civilized as the parents than were

Banks and Best. The original parents, being English, are part of Europe, and ultimately play by very much the same rules as their antagonists. Stewart and Day, by contrast, are richer and more glamorous than their British counterparts, but by the time they resolve their predicament they have exposed themselves as unusually Ugly Americans.

The second Albert Hall sequence, for example, is hotter and more hysterical than the first, but whereas one feels that Best was driven finally to scream by a moral awakening, Day seems to have screamed after an emotional explosion that convulsed her whole being. Banks and Best think; Stewart and Day feel. Banks and Best are somewhat insular in just wanting their daughter back despite all the international ramifications of the threatened assassination. Stewart and Day are equally irresponsible on the international level, but in addition, Stewart takes it upon himself to become the executioner of his enemies, though not with any formal intentions. It is just that he is a bull in a china shop, an American amok in Africa and Europe, an unbridled force from the New World let loose on the Old.

Both films are darkened further by Hitchcock's legendary hatred of the constabulary of all nations, and by tantalizing hints of homosexual activity in scenes that hover between the humorous and the sinister. By 1956 Hitchcock had placed himself at a greater distance from his characters and milieu than he was capable of doing in 1934. What he lost in the warmth and sweetness of bumbling imperfections, he gained in the brilliance and savagery of his moral paradoxes. The 1956 *The Man Who Knew Too Much* is a thrilling piece of cinema for anyone who can appreciate the working out of formal problems as a means of stirring the murky depths of the unconscious. If you come out of the movie relieved that Stewart and Day are back together and happy again with their surprisingly sissyish little boy, then you have missed the whole point of Stewart's implacability and Day's delirium. This is no ordinary nuclear family. Trust Hitchcock to set it off with a bang, and then let the moral fallout poison the ostensibly "happy" ending.